



A FULFILLING CAREER
Pam Dickens, shown here working at an Animal Balance spay/neuter pop-up clinic, has worked in several areas of veterinary medicine since starting in the 1980s.



CLINIC CHAMPION:

Pam Dickens, CVT

Odessa, Florida

Pam Dickens, CVT, is an ultra runner. She has run countless marathons, including every single Disney World Marathon since 1994. She once completed a 100-mile ultramarathon and recently finished the Dopey Challenge at Walt Disney World in January. Don't let the name fool you—this involves running a 5K, 10K, half marathon, and marathon (for a total of 48.6 miles) over the span of 4 consecutive days.

Top: Courtesy of Animal Balance

But for Dickens, the run of her life started in 1980.

That's when she found out about the veterinary technology program at St. Petersburg Junior College (now St. Petersburg College). She decided to take a step up from volunteering at her local veterinary office, doing odd jobs ranging from mowing the lawn to cleaning kennels, and apply for the program. Shortly after that she became a certified veterinary technician and continued on the course that has taken several twists and turns.

One leg of the race saw Dickens carrying the Olympic torch through the city of Tampa ahead of the 1996 Olympics through a connection met at her pet therapy program (the torch is "large and heavy," she says with a laugh).

This course has also taken Dickens overseas to the Galapagos Islands in Ecuador, Guam, and Mauritius, among other locations, hosting spay/neuter clinics and training local people on compassionate animal care through a program called Animal Balance (animalbalance.org).

Throughout the journey Dickens has steered through bad times and good. She joined the local Florida State Animal Response Team in providing critical care for animals following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and for several other disasters since then with the ASPCA and Humane Society.

And she's also adopted many animals in need of a loving home along the way (Dickens and her husband are the proud parents of 19 dogs).

When Dickens is not flying overseas or collecting medals, she also works as a contractor for Nestlé Purina



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PetCare, which she represents at veterinary conferences such as VMX. She also works relief shifts at the Animal Care Center of Pasco County, near her home in Odessa, Florida. One volunteer project that has followed Dickens throughout her career is pet therapy. She started in the '80s by bringing dogs to see patients at Moffitt Cancer Center; today, she continues at Tampa General Hospital.

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"What I found in the spay/neuter world is I'm able to help others that aren't as old as I am. I've been around a while, so I'm able to try to help them learn and not be intimidated by some of the things that I found intimidating early on," says Dickens. "I love that aspect of having so much diversity in what I do. With Purina at conferences, I'm learning new things—what's the latest out there and I'm educating about nutrition. That is just a polar opposite of then being on an island and doing spay/neuter for animals in someone's garage or a



Every day, veterinary nurses/technicians make a positive impact on their clients, patients, coworkers, and greater community. But the stories behind each and every one of these

professionals are often overlooked due to the selfless nature of working in veterinary medicine.

Today's Veterinary Nurse aims to shine a light on some of these stories with its Clinic Champions series. Each issue, TVN and Midmark will honor a veterinary nurse for their contributions in community service, scholarship, advocacy, or innovation. This series will highlight unsung heroes who make a lasting impact on their patients and community.

At the end of the year, 1 of the 4 honorees will be recognized as the Clinic Champion of the Year. This individual will receive a trip to VMX 2023 in Orlando, Florida, including registration, hotel, and airfare.

→ To nominate a veterinary nurse/technician, visit bit.ly/ClinicChampions.



pop-up out in the field. I get a lot from each of those different experiences.”

Elsa Kohlbus, program director at Animal Balance, first met Dickens on a campaign in the Dominican Republic. On that trip, Dickens adopted a dog after helping treat it for a severe machete wound across its throat. It was then that Kohlbus knew she was working with a compassionate and driven person.

“When she is working at a clinic, she is the person who keeps everyone’s energy up and positive, especially when the days are long or difficult,” says Kohlbus.

“Everyone, and this is not hyperbole, literally *everyone* wants to work with Pam. This sometimes makes my job hard because I can only put her in one place at a time!”

THE BEST MEDICINE

Below: Pam Dickens’ dog, Huey, shakes with a patient during a pet therapy visit in Clearwater, Florida. Opposite: Dickens (left) poses with her dogs during a pet therapy visit at Tampa General Hospital.

Pam doesn’t just bring the energy to the clinic, she *is* the energy of the clinic.”

This may seem like more roles than any one person could ever fulfill. Dickens understands that she is in a unique situation that has been afforded to her after decades of practice.

“I don’t feel any different than the rest of us. I know so many technicians and veterinary nurses that are exactly like me. I tell you what, I did not start out in ’82 doing the volunteer work that I do now,” says Dickens. “I have an amazing, supportive husband, who takes care of all the animals when I’m on the road and traveling and doing these things. That is very, very helpful. I think we all do our part in whatever way that might be. I do not have children, but I have dogs and cats and I’m able to rescue them.”

We spoke with Dickens to learn more about her experiences in pet therapy, spay/neuter clinics, and more:



TODAY'S VETERINARY NURSE: When you go into a facility like Moffitt or Tampa General, what does that look like? What are the interactions like and how do the patients respond to the pets?

PAM DICKENS: It starts the day before by getting the dogs bathed and ready—because they have to be nice and clean—making sure their nails are nice and dremeled, picking out their clothes. Because we do want to dress to impress when we go! Then our day is just traveling to the hospitals. We visit patients, and usually we are guided by either a pediatric therapist or they have oftentimes already talked to patients that want to visit the dogs. It's just a way to cheer up these patients and give them a little break in their day. We're not providing animal-assisted therapy. Thankfully, there's a lot of amazing programs and facility dogs that are now doing that sort of thing. We're just there to cheer up anybody and everybody who wants to see us. And that includes the nurses and the doctors and any of the staff there that are always so friendly and love to see everybody coming down the halls.

TVN: Are there any specific people or moments that stick out in your mind and exemplify why you do this therapy work?

DICKENS: Some of these patients we will see on a weekly basis, and you see their progression and how they're coming along. They'll remember the dogs and request them. There's just a lot of times where we see that progression and that kind of brings things to the forefront of what you can't do in human medicine. You don't have that same connection as people do with animals. The animals are not judging you, they're not looking at anything that's going on with you physically, they don't care what you're hooked up to or what smells are happening—of course, unless there's food. It's fun to see that aspect of it and see the rehab patients that maybe are getting motion back and movement with their hands or they're able to try to vocalize and say Alice's name or Huey [Dickens' personal dogs that join her for pet therapy]. You know, just simple acts that we take for granted that are huge steps in their healing process. So those are the kind of things for me that really stand out and make a difference.

And it's a very, very addicting kind of thing. The dogs get excited every week we pull out their vest that they work in. They're excited, but I love it as much as they do. You know, it's not to say that I don't get anything from it, I do. But I am doing it because of the joy that it brings.



TVN: What about endurance running is attractive to you? What do you get out of that ritual and experience?

DICKENS: Clearing your mind is a huge one. Ultra running is a lot in your head. I mean, you definitely have to be prepared, but when you're out running it's just you. So I can think about things. I can listen to a podcast if I want. I have playlists. But it's the challenge. I am competitive, but it's really just with myself, because I'm not a competitive runner, by any aspect. But it's also something that I feel like has helped me in the rescue world and doing the deployments post-disasters, because you have to maybe sleep in your car and be self-sufficient. You know, if you're running all night, you have to be that way as well. You may be in your car for days, you're sweaty, you have to make do with whatever you have. People joke with me because I eat like a 3-year-old, which is very sustainable when you're doing disaster work. There, peanut butter and jelly is the greatest thing ever invented. Uncrustables are the best food ever. I was just in far west Texas. There were no restaurants where we were; there was nothing around. They told us to come prepared. So I had my GoGo squeeZ applesauce, and one of the vets I was with asked, "Are you 4?" I said, "6." I joke that ultra running has prepared me for these kinds of things.

TVN: Who do you work with for these on-location spay/neuter clinics and what do they involve?

DICKENS: I do most of my trips with a nonprofit group



CLINIC CHAMPIONS

called Animal Balance. We do get to travel the world. In October, I was in the Galapagos Islands with them spaying and neutering dogs and cats. Dogs and cats are not endemic to the Galapagos Islands, sadly they were smuggled in. Animal Balance started in 2004 there in the Galapagos, so they do travel back. The pandemic put everybody kind of upside-down in the spay/neuter world. And, of course, in private practice as well. We're all still struggling to catch back up. But the travel is an amazing aspect of this program. ... And what I love most about the program is we try to make it sustainable, meaning you're training local people, trying to get them educated and help create these programs for their community. It's not about going in and doing it all for these areas, because that's not going to be sustainable. So that's the educational aspect that I love.

TVN: How does the training work for the local people?

DICKENS: We train pretty much anyone who is willing to learn. We try to involve even the children to get them to see what compassionate animal care is and handling and educate about spaying and neutering. Oftentimes on islands, some of the population control is more geared toward euthanasia of the animals. And as we know, that's not a population control. So we're trying to educate about spay/neuter. We do sometimes have programs in schools. We just did that on the Galapagos. But also maybe not every location has veterinarians available. So we try to help local people learn some triage techniques just to help them with vaccination protocols and learning how to vaccinate the animals and doing things that they can. And of course, whenever there are veterinarians available, they come along and learn high-volume spay/neuter techniques and anything else that they might need.

When we were just in the Galapagos, there was a dog on one island that had a ruptured trachea. She had a collar that had been embedded, and her trachea had a very large hole—so basically like a tracheostomy. And she had been that way for 3 months, because there's no veterinarian on the island. I have a dog who also suffered from a very similar injury. She was from the Dominican Republic. So it was fascinating that here we were 8 years later from when I got that dog, and I'm in the same situation like, "Oh, OK, I've seen this before." And the veterinarians went to work and you know, one veterinarian was repairing her trachea, the other veterinarian did an ovariohysterectomy on her, and she's doing great today. — *By Andy Zunz TVN*



2022
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